

Grace and peace are yours dear friends, from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; Amen.

Many of us will become nervous, troubled, and even deaf to what the gospel message proclaims today because for many years, people think this has something to do with money. Additionally, some may feel there is no place for success in the Kingdom of God, and no room for happiness, laughter, and joy. In contrast we see a picture in the gospel text of everything that we do NOT want to be: poor, hungry, weeping, and hated. Therefore, we may struggle to understand the message and the truth the Good News contains for us.

If there ever was a no-win gospel text, this would be one of them. For that matter, there is more pain and suffering in the world today with disease, famine, loneliness, fear, hatred for others, that it would seem the gospel is speaking to the majority of the people who struggle with the very structures of prosperous life.

Maybe part of the difficulty with the gospel text today is the image of ‘blessings and woes or even the possibility of curses’. It brings to mind a system of rewards and punishments, which in turn clouds the image of what our Lord has planned for each of us. And there is good reason for this. You see the narrative of God’s relationship with His chosen people Israel is all about obedience that was too much to attain. Faithful living to the commands given to us by God were never meant to be a burden.

And still, the very framework provided to us for moral, obedient, and prosperous life in relationship with God, self, others, and nature was not possible to fulfill given our free-will and our weakness to be tempted, enticed, and fooled into believing in something even better. Yes, the human, mortal, and earthly beings appear to be vulnerable when considered in the context of the heavenly beings. However, my friends, we alone have God’s word that we ‘are created – in the image of God’. No other creature or created being (in heaven or on earth) has this distinction; it is granted uniquely to humankind. Being created in the image of God also reveals the eternal connection and relationship we will have with our Lord for all time.

We are created as heirs to a Kingdom and placed in a world designed solely for our existence, growth, enjoyment, engagement, exploration, and experience. The world we are blessed with is the perfect place for God to make Himself known to us; to reveal His love, plans, and faithfulness for us. And so, the story of our relationship with our God begins.

Ironically, almost unbelievably, human life is not satisfied with being the best; we want more and we allow ourselves to be drawn away from our destiny with images and ideas that are nothing more than the means to convince us that we are less than ‘what we are’. We follow the abandoned path, listen to the hollow words, and gaze upon the smoky images and dreams of ‘what could be’ without ever understanding (or accepting) what is ‘meant to be’.

Because the struggles and challenges continue in this life, we desperately seek happiness, laughter, acceptance, and joy today, which brings us to the meaning our Lord is presenting in our gospel text. Last week, Mrs. Brown was ice fishing in the wrong place; she was attempting to cut a hole on a hockey rink rather than a lake. We use this image to reinforce the gospel message of going where we are called and not where we desire. Today, consider the movie classic; Christmas Vacation.

There is more theology in this movie than meets the eye my friends. To align the gospel text to a scene in this movie; consider the sequence where Clark Griswold meets with his CEO, Mr. Shirley and offers him a Christmas present. Now, what could an employee possibly give a CEO... who has everything? Clark offers a humble gift and leaves it on the table in the CEO's office. Mr. Shirley then becomes annoyed with the distraction and quickly terminates the encounter to resume his routine.

God is portrayed in this scene as the faithful and trustworthy source of strength in our life that offers gifts that are not of this world, but blessings of a kingdom that will last forever. Because we face challenges in this world, we want to be happy and often seek the happiness of this world and not the humble and eternal gifts of our Lord that will sustain us in times of any crisis or trial.

Jeremiah and the psalmist present the image of trees planed by the waters that endure the heat and drought; that continue to bear fruit; that remain healthy and green. Because we have the gift of faith, the knowledge of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ; the gifts of the Spirit to share with others; we *are* the trees that are planted firmly next to the waters because your Lord has moved your heart and minds to a holy place in His very presence.

My dear friends in Christ, there are still people who are like the trees in the desert; people who are happy for the wrong reasons and hold onto false and empty hopes. We have friends and neighbors who are still unable to receive the humble gifts of blessing, grace, and mercy from God because they have been accepting the disposable gifts of this world. And God has His eye and best interest in these very people and calls upon us to use our faith so they might be planted among us next to the streams of living waters.

God created us in His image; an image of community, life, happiness, joy, and abounding love that sustains and endures forever: that my friends are the beginning, rest, and end of the story. God created us not to be sad, depressed, lonely, or despaired. So when we find ourselves lost, empty, and alone; God promises to provide, to fill, to bless and tend to us where our joy is greater than anything we might find in this world.

God is the source of all goodness, kindness, love and mercy! God is a selfish God and wants to be the one who makes us happy, content, and at peace. When we look for our happiness and peace on our own and outside of what our Lord provides; we are lead down a path that will deceive and empty us to the point where we are then able to accept what our Lord is able to provide, gift, and grant.

Too many of us will learn what it is like to be emptied by our own means before we come to understanding the gifts that our Lord offers that will fill us completely with an abundance of blessings; blessing that are then offered to fill others.

God works through each of us for the collective health and prosperity of life together. God works through you and me to reveal the living waters that flow among us; that keep us strong, bearing fruit, and seeking the peace that passes all understanding that keeps our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord; Amen.